

# DreaganStar

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## CHAPTER 1 - PREFLIGHT

They had ordered, rather than requested her presence, then left her waiting in a small anti-chamber for well over an hour. Now slightly miffed, Doctor Samantha Alexander had considered leaving for a bite of lunch, when a massive blond jack of a man in a black security uniform opened the tall polysteel door and silently gestured her into the Board of Directors' chamber. She followed him into the spacious room, feeling an unusual suspicion. The inner chamber felt even more sterile than the majority of the artificial, underground environment in the city of Proteus. Thin sheets of polished gray moon rock decorated the always-present, dull polysteel walls that sealed in the atmosphere. Lighting, as always indirect and psychologically effective, directed Samantha to the long slate-blue table at the other end of the cold room. Seated behind the blue lacquered, crescent-shaped table waited Dreagan Corporation's Board of Directors, who, along with the colony's Founder, Doctor Jonathan Dreagan, made up this ruling body of this pseudo-socialistic lunar colony.

Doctor Dreagan was not present.

Sam suppressed her frown.

Three of the four somber-looking men seated before Samantha had worked with Jon Dreagan for over 15 years, guiding the

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growth of each of the lunar colonies. Gus Adams was a nondescript, low-key company man. Doctor Ron Nichols was not only Dreagan's longtime friend, Sam knew, but also his personal physician. The translucent skinned, aging Doctor Vincent Abernathy had been the Founder's mentor for most of Dreagan's adult life. In keeping with lunar law, the fourth member of the Board, Amil Groves, had been elected, a mouthpiece for the masses, and was officially called the *Speaker of the People*. Sam Alexander was glad he only had eight months left in his term of office. Many lunans couldn't wait for the election to come.

Sammie felt slightly relieved that Doctor Dreagan was absent from the meeting, but now felt even more curious about her summons. Under the searching gazes of the four old gents, she shifted into a more defensive mental posture as she moved toward the spotlighted area. She knew these men by both reputation and psychological profiles, so Sam knew to be cautious. A little play acting went along way, and Sam was wary. Psychology was usually trickier than just the individual being studied.

These four were clever, she reminded herself as she stepped onto the lighted forum. She feigned humility, willing her body to slump slightly, while lowering her head. She made her fingers twitch and flutter.

“Doctor Alexander,” Speaker Amil Groves began while glancing at her through bushy brown and gray eyebrows. “We reviewed your portfolio, and although you are not the psychologist we had requested, you come highly recommended.”

Sam wondered who had been their first choice, but remained silent, studying her gray cloth shoes, listening intensely.

“Your Trade has granted us unlimited use of your time and skills. My colleagues and I require your services for an assignment that may take you away from the psy-clinic for a few weeks,” gray-haired Abernathy continued. “So, first thing after you leave here, you will return to your office and reschedule your patients to other members of your staff. Understand?”

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“No clinic work during your assignment. All right.” She swallowed once for effect, carefully watching the four, while wondering what they might be plotting. “My assignment?”

The man to Groves' right, Gus Adams, a sloppy little man, slammed closed a cube of disks and leered at her with contempt. From the other side of the crescent table, red-haired Ronald Nichols stifled a laugh.

“Space it, Nichols,” Groves grumbled, then turned his watery eyes in Samantha's direction.

“The Founder has gone space happy, and you, my dear, are qualified to make that diagnosis official. Take your time in your study of Dr. Dreagan, if he'll even see you. We want you to be completely thorough in your investigation. Is that understood?”

“S-space happy is vague... rather ambiguous,” she started, deliberately twisting a button on her gray tunic. She grimaced. “Do you mean schizophrenic, manic depressive, or obsessive-compulsive? Has he turned violent?”

“Oh, trust me. He is all that and much more,” Speaker Groves drawled, picking absently at his cuticles. “You *will* conclude that Dreagan is ill-fit to preside over the Dreagan Corporation. Take your time. Be thorough.” He leaned on his left hand while pointing his right index finger in her direction, causing Sam to suppress her rebellious reaction. “Be sure your findings please this Board. Understand, now?”

*So, that's it*, she thought, resenting their flagrant, thinly veiled assumption that she would follow their orders and not those of her own Trade. *They're trying to push Dreagan out*, she thought. *But, specifically who? And why?*

“Dr. Nichols,” Sam murmured. “Is Dreagan physically well?”

“Fit enough but I have cautioned him against returning to Earth's gravity. He's a Lunan, permanently. You may have access to his psychological profile and past medical records to begin. I've ordered copies to be given to you as you leave here. Study them,

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and when you are ready, let me know, and I'll try to get Jon to talk to you.”

“Thank you, Dr. Nichols,” she said politely to the man who'd known her new patient the longest and whose reputation was the cleanest of this dirty bunch. “I have no other questions.”

“Dismissed,” Groves said with a wave of his liver-spotted right hand and as one, the four men stood and as one, walked away.



The rest of that day Samantha shifted her caseload and managerial responsibilities to others on her staff, finding that a few special patients were difficult to assign to her barely-qualified assistant, Master Psychologist Taylor Roberts. She told herself she could continue monitoring some of these cases, even if she was not supposed to. Sam felt determined not to get lost within the personality quirks that were notorious in pioneer, inventor, and city builder, Jonathan Dreagan.

Sam already knew that Dreagan, a genius of global renown, had odd habits and an uncivil and rude tongue, except when he recorded his *DreaganStar* educational programs. After conquering the moon and then making it somewhat comfortable and profitable for people to live below its surface, Dreagan had, for the last two years, contented himself with his minor inventions while producing holotank productions about the wonders of this and other galaxies. His programs circulated extensively through Earth's secondary schools and a few were used in initial astronavigation training. Jonathan Dreagan had one of the most creative and intellectual minds our species had yet produced. From his lack of public life, Jonathan Dreagan appeared to be an extremely private individual.

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For the next four days, when not doling out her patients to other staff members at the psy-clinic, Samantha studied the privileged information the Board had granted her. Additionally, she scanned the central library records for any information she could find on her new client. The data included eighty-seven *DreaganStar* programs, all created in the last twenty-eight months. There were three documentaries about the first and most difficult years of the colony existence, as well as four special 90 minute videos, under the designation *Flights of Fancy*, depicting his hypothetical journeys into the far reaches of space. All these had been produced in Dreagan's private holo-studio, located in what had been Proteus's original lunar landing port, not far from his underground home.



Four days after receiving her assignment from the Board of Directors, Samantha arrived in the oldest section of the city at the south end of Proteus, at the site where the Founder, Jon Dreagan, kept his personal workshops and living quarters. Everything Sam had researched on the man seemed to be concocted of one type of rumor or another. *What was the real man like?* she wondered again, while strolling passed the southern cubbies near his large residence. Judging from the size of the door, air locks and triple-paned windows, homes in South Proteus were more spacious than the newer section of the underground city. Here, near the surface, the dull gray corridors and polysteel-lined tunnels were larger, less confining, and Sam wondered what the local residential cubbies were like on the inside as she moved toward the old spaceport and her new assignment.

South Proteus had been constructed in the first year of the first colony over fifteen years ago. Back then, each cubby had its own life-support system—very expensive, Samantha thought. Everyone

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had lived on the surface in structures resembling Quonset huts and so had to wear full pressure suits just to go from one residence to another.

Before her, the tunnel sloped upward at a slight angle. She easily moon-bounced in the low gravity, and soon stood on the moon's surface. Around her, dinner plate-sized portholes offered glimpses of the surrounding flat, gray terrain with craggy, dark mountains rising far off into starlit black sky. The corridor itself was lit by Sol, which hovered on Luna's distant horizon. The shadows grew long. As she hurried through the maintenance tunnel, Sam became aware of the glittering addition to the sprawling old spaceport that was now Jon Dreagan's private playground.

Beside the now-unused Operations and Control Tower, an almost crystalline structure gleamed, rising over five levels high within a transparent dome. Sammie stopped to peer out a porthole and had to consciously tell herself to breathe again. The clear dome that enclosed the spaceport looked like thin ice on a small fishing pond. The crystal-like structure Jon Dreagan used in his holography programs stood inside. The oddly shaped holographic studio was a very familiar sight to the general public - and to Sam because of her recent research. Excitement and delight stirred in her as she studied it.

The tall, multi-pointed structure looked like the shining star that sits on the top of a Christmas tree. Spikes of polysteel girders wrapped in something translucent and pearlescent jutted out from an opaque, hollow core that nested about two-thirds of the way up the body of the structure. She knew that this hollow area housed a holo-studio that balanced on a tripod of crystal appendages. The structure had been intentionally designed to resemble the fictional space vessel Dreagan flew in his educational programs. A gangplank stretched from the roof of the old spaceport's Operations tower, into a gap between two of the more massive, glittering spikes of the ridiculous structure. Samantha seriously

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doubted this thing's ability to fly and with a chuckle, continued through the access tunnel, childlike anticipation in each step.

Sam's research had furnished her with a strong mental map of the area and a good excuse for her being there. This rock-gray maintenance tunnel provided her a back door to visit Dan'l Girdner, one of her father's old buddies. Reporting to the back gate security guard, dressed in traditional Security Trade *black*, Sam waited while he verified her appointment by comm link. After a stern warning to go straight to her intended destination, the Security jack waved her into the compound with specific directions to Girdner's shop.

Dan'l Girdner, a friend of the family's for almost forty years, had always joked that he had "adopted" her somewhere during her childhood. She had shouted for joy when she had found Dan'l's name on the small roster of Dreagan's sound stage staff. Dan'l had been listed only as a Master Electrician, and Sam felt unsettled that her old friend was working at only average Trade wages. His abilities made him worth so much more! She had also felt unsettled by the fact that his contract was recorded as exclusive. Samantha felt regret at not keeping up with old Dan'l.

Ahead of her, the polysteel corridor opened into the outdated spaceport receiving bay next to the main dome, protected from the vacuum by giga-yards of clear polysteel. Feeling uncomfortable with how fragile these older structures were in the face of meteorite showers, Samantha gazed about, looking for the clues that would direct her to Building Six, the Electronics shop. Soon a Trade Blue 6 on the side of a corrugated steel building caught her eye, and she casually crossed the short distance to the small metal structure, unchallenged by the men working around there. Few females worked in the industrial Trades planet side, and fewer had dared the challenges of the moon.

To her left, the mock starship glowed in Sol's light, and shimmering rainbows danced on walls and floors in a colorful display. Sam thought of her mom's crystal chandelier in the dining

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room and how it seemed to become magically enchanted in the Montana sunlight of her childhood. Grinning, she stopped to look up again around the dome and the ridiculous-looking holo studio before entering Dan'l's shop. She found herself aesthetically liking that crystal monstrosity, even if it wasn't flight worthy.

As Samantha stepped into the large polysteel hut that housed Dan'l's shop, a young man dressed in the deep *Blue* that indicated his electronics apprenticeship smiled up from his work bench. His raven black hair, which tumbled riotously around his ears, immediately labeled him as the teen Dan'l had spoken of a few months earlier. This handsome youth could have become an Entertainment Specialist, according to Dan'l, if he applied himself in *that* Trade, and in fewer years than most. What had Dan'l called him? *Todd*.

“Is Master Dan'l around, Todd?” she asked, meeting dark, innocent eyes above that Trade Blue smock. “We have a dinner date.”

“And you are?”

“Sam Alexander.”

Hopping quickly to his feet, the teen gave her a wide-eyed glance, blushing with discomfort at the unexpected presence of the moon's Senior Psychologist. After nearly five years as an *AshenGrey*, Samantha still disliked the effect her Trade-presence had on some.

“M-master Girdner is still out on *T-the Project*,” Todd stammered, looking nervously toward the door she'd come in. Then, the gangly apprentice turned, touched a corner of his *hand held*, and paged Dan'l.

While Todd waited for a response, Samantha turned her attentions to the oddly familiar atmosphere of this electronics shop. It reminded her of her own electronics apprenticeship, ages ago, when she had served a year for her “uncle.” Like the five or six shops of his that she'd visited through the years back on Earth, this one bore Dan'l's personal touch of organization and planning.

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Two journeymen in medium Blue and another apprentice clustered at the far end of the open alcove, waited out the final ticking seconds of the working week. Tomorrow was *RestDay*, and anyone could see that these Lunans were ready for their day off.

“Dr. Alexander?” Todd called, as she wandered toward one of the three neatly kept worktables. “My master sends his regards and asks if you could wait a few minutes.”

“Tell your master I am hungry,” she said smiling lightheartedly. “So, he'd better not be too long.”

“That's probably up to Doctor D.” Dan'l's voice chuckled over the comm's speaker. “Tell everybody to have a good RestDay and send them home, Todd. And you do the same.”

“Yes sir!” The teen grinned with a glance at his comrades, who had heard the order.

The others quickly grabbed their personal gear and made their way through the shop's back airlock. As Sam watched their departure, she heard the young man ask his superior about her. She returned to the tidy metal work desk and young Todd.

“She'd better stay there,” he replied with a scowling tone over the comm's speaker. “I'll be there in about five minutes, apprentice. And I want you gone when I get there. Girdner—Out.”

The comm fell quiet after the customary chime that closed the connection, and Sam found shy dark eyes on her with questions in them. Looking down at her plain tights and floral tunic, she wondered if she had dressed appropriately for an evening with her Uncle Dan'l.

“I would remember if we had met, AshenGrey,” Todd said, standing near the computer that connected to all the city's communications, video, and library facilities. “Are you an elec-tech too?”

“*Royal blue, just like you.*” Sam grinned, using a common Electronics Trade's idiom.

“I heard you earned the *Rank of Rainbow.*”

“It's a fractured rainbow at best,” she replied with a shrug.

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“Gonna become one of the Whites?” he asked, referring to those six people alive, who had mastered five Trades or more. “It might be nice to finally have a woman that high up in the Trades.”

“I’m happy working in this Trade,” Sammie said, then turned the conversation’s focus. “I understand that you’ve had a tough year. I understand you recently lost your mother.”

“Depends on who you have been talking to, AshenGrey.” He avoided her eyes while shutting down his computer.

“Dan’l was very impressed after you joined his crew last winter.” Sam rested her left hip on the side of the desk. “He spoke highly of your abilities—theatrical as well as electrical. Have you ever thought that you missed your true vocation?”

“Entertainment? No, thanks.” He frowned, shaking his head. “*Those* people are the real crazies. And weirdoes, too.”

“The creative nature does seem to give way to some unusual characters,” Samantha conceded. “But, *crazies*? I wouldn’t say that. And I ought to know.”

“Doctor D’s a fine example of a creative crazy,” Todd pronounced, then he turned and closed the last of the cabinet doors. “Why is it I always end up playing housekeeper around here?”

“The joys of apprenticeship,” she muttered, smiling at her own memories.

“Look, I have to run, Dr. Alexander.” He smiled, moving toward the exit. “My master should be here really quickly.”

“Go. And be good to yourself.”

And with that, all that youth standing 190 centimeters of slim masculinity bounced out the airlock door.

Her mirrored image met Sam on the safety glass of the airlock’s porthole. Her hair was long and deep brown with auburn highlights. She’d always wished it had the body and bulk most women enjoyed, and sometimes left her to feel a little inadequate for her slight tomboyish figure. *But still, I don’t have trouble fitting in a pressure suit and bubblehead*, she reminded herself.

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She concluded, as always, that she liked being who she was, whoever she *needed to be* at the time.

Chuckling to herself, Sam slid into an old office chair to wait for Dan'l. The young apprentice's word flowed back to her. Did she hear Todd call his boss crazy? *Good, fun crazy or dangerous, twisted crazy?* she wondered.



When Samantha heard the footfalls, she was relaxed, playfully imagining her first conversation with Jonathan Dreagan. What if she divulged the Board's scheming to the *Founder* right on the spot? The blatant lack of tact struck a humorous chord in her, and smiling, she opened her eyes again. Deciding to meet them standing, she stood and brushed the wrinkles from her green floral tunic.

Dan'l Girdner bounded his two-meter bulk into the building, strode across the non-conductive metal floor, and greeted her in their customary fashion. Wrapping his huge hands around her waist, the aging man swung her easily into the lunar air, taking advantage of the low gravity to perform her favorite childhood greeting.

“Put me down, you old dear,” she chuckled, and her feet bounced twice as they settled together on the deck plates.

“Oh, you look lovely, Sammie-girl.” He kissed her cheek then hugged her in his delight.

“It’s good to see you, Uncle Dan'l,” she responded. “And what took so long? I am hungry.”

Glimpsing a shadow moving into the open hatch, Sam quit her mock pout.

Pushing out of the Master Electrician's affectionate embrace, she turned to see a dark-haired man of medium but muscular build springing into the gray and blue shop. Dressed in dirty white

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coveralls, *The Founder*, Doctor Jonathan Dreagan moved like a man in charge, tall and straight without seeming rigid. He had the dark, handsome features of an aristocratic European. *Somewhere outside of Mount Olympus*, she thought reminding herself of his human tendencies to be gruff and domineering. Her pulse had quickened, and she realized she'd been holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, and then swallowed once to ease the dryness of her throat. She felt mildly surprised by this reaction to seeing Dreagan for the first time.

“Dan'l, I want to run those goddamned tests again tomorrow,” he was saying as he stepped to them and halted almost nose to nose with her uncle. “Be here at zero-nine-thirty.”

The tone held no room for argument, and Sam marveled to see Dan'l's lack of response. Usually her uncle would have bristled at being told his business. This man held a power over her uncle, she warned herself. His charisma radiated throughout the shop like the energy that draws the eye to the flame. She watched Dreagan carefully, intrigued.

“You'll recall tomorrow's RestDay?” Dan'l asked dryly, without irritation.

“Screw it. You said you didn't have any plans,” Dreagan challenged, eyeing Samantha briefly with a penetrating blink of thick black lashes. “You *will* be here.”

The last was spoken to Dan'l, yet Sam knew without a doubt that she'd been quickly categorized and filed by the Founder.

“Jon, this is my guest for the evening—” Dan'l began.

“AshenGrey Samantha Alexander, Director of the Proteus Psy-Clinic,” he said with a slight bow of chivalry, smiling in her direction. “This is an unexpected pleasure, Doctor, I must say. But please, excuse me. I'm busy.”

“So, I see,” she said with a calculating look in his direction, instantly liking the handsome man she saw. She looked back at Dan'l, and said “I didn't mean to take you away from something, Uncle Dan'l.”

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“And you haven't, Sammie-gal.” He smiled, and then glanced at his employer who was storing test equipment in a large wall locker.

“We are finished for the evening, AshenGrey.” Dreagan smiled then muttered something under his breath that sounded rude. “I'll see you at zero nine thirty, Dan'l.”

“Yes, *El Jefe*,” the bigger man responded, laughing, then touched Sam's elbow to signal their departure. “Now, get your carcass out of my shop, Jon, so I can lock up.”

“Be sure you do.” Dreagan seemed flushed when he straightened, and slammed the locker closed.

Turning on his heels, Dan'l's boss hurried past Samantha toward the front air lock. He smelled of a hard work, a pleasant smell. Then he stopped at the hatch and scowled back at her uncle.

“I don't want to hear about any more security problems.” He spoke harshly, and then the scowl disappeared, replaced by a bright smile as he turned to Sam, eyes twinkling. “Good evening, AshenGrey.”

Sam's ears felt hot as she tried to calm the flutter in her stomach. *Butterflies, at your age?* She asked herself. Dreagan possessed of some intangible quality that had left her blood racing. She focused on Dreagan's last words while her old friend checked around his shop one last time. *Problems?* Security seemed more than adequate from her earlier observations. Sam felt puzzled as her new client disappeared through the lock, and Dan'l shut down the shop's power. She stepped towards the front airlock.

“Security problems?” She asked as Dan'l palmed the outer lock. “I've heard whispers about a gantry accident.”

“Ha! Now, why he said that in front of you is beyond me,” he said in a huff, and they stepped out across the perimeter of the domed compound with its star-like building that housed Jonathan Dreagan's production studio.

“Why did Dr. Dreagan choose to build his stage like that?” she asked, looking across at the towering crystal edifice with all its

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dozens of glittering points. “That stuff stretched around each limb is almost transparent. What is it made from, Dan’l?”

“Wait, now, Sweetie.” He laughed softly as they walked. “Don’t ask too many questions. That only makes new ones, you know. Besides, you said you’d take the night off. That means *mentally*, too.”

“Too many new questions,” she sighed, stretching her legs to bounce after the old man’s longer strides.



Hart’s had been one of Proteus’s better restaurants ever since colonists first settled on the dusty lunar surface in pressurized huts. As private explorers found the caverns and inhabited them, James and Stacey Hart had wisely relocated their private-booth eatery underground and donated a percent of the profits toward colonial excavation. As Jon Dreagan explored, established, and expanded his colonial corporation, so did the Hart franchise and purse. Their establishments boasted a safari atmosphere, complete with silk plants, taxidermists’ creations, old photographs of the real animals, and large holos that gave a feeling of being in the African veldt. Sam was relieved when she realized that the tunic she’d chosen blended very well with the sand and fake greenery. And again she wished that some scientist would develop some plant life that could survive the unearthly light gravity.

Dan’l had been too long away from their booth, she decided after a server in Trade journeyman Green delivered their drinks. Her “uncle” had excused himself to make some comm, leaving her to ponder the conversational patter they’d enjoyed on the public cart ride to this establishment. Her parents’ longtime friend had been vague during the fifteen-minute commute through the caverns and tunnels of the moon. His hesitation to speak too openly about his boss confirmed the respect and friendship

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between the two men. Samantha's research had shown that people associated with Jonathan Dreagan tended to become introverted due to the public's fascination with the Founder. This had begun soon after the time capsules of the most recent colony, Halpern, were buried in those gray caves five years ago. Catching herself, she turned her thought to more recent events of teaching at the University of Tranquility. Samantha had decided to wait five minutes more before she rose to search out her friend, the crystal blue Trade Master.

Coming up the tree-lined path between booths, Dan'l waved his fingers at Samantha. She put her aggravation aside until she heard his explanation. Dan'l's wrinkled face held an irritation of its own as he slid onto the padded bench across from her.

"Sorry, Sammie-gal," he began with a deep sigh and patted her hand. "*El Jefé* can be a royal pain at times."

"Who came up with *El Jefé*?" she asked, casually studying him.

"Cal Washington. Have you met him yet?"

"Dreagan's engineer pal," she said, smiling. "And his drinking buddy."

"That's the one." Again he sneered. "Cal's got an over-inflated mouth to match his over-inflated ego."

"That's surprising, coming from you," she said, then sipped her jasmine tea, while she watched Dan'l frowning.

"You didn't answer me about Washington."

"No. I haven't met the man," she replied, not adding that she'd studied his file with great interest. "I take it you were just speaking with Dreagan?"

"Just checking my messages." He sighed, reaching for his beer. "Seems he wants to run those checks two hours earlier."

"Zero-seven-thirty, it is, then?" She snickered, knowing her friend preferred to sleep in whenever possible.

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“More like zero-dark-thirty, if you ask me. Ha!” He frowned, taking a deep breath before continuing. “That man's a workaholic, Sweetie. I swear he is.”

“You may want to sing a different melody,” she warned, mentally filing this piece of information on Dreagan to be proved or disproved later.

“Says who?” Dan'l sassed, looking over the display of pictured foods on the lighted menu panel to her left. “Have you ordered?”

“My mama raised me right!” She pouted playfully.

“You're a brat, you know.” He stopped his reading and eyed her. “What about the song I'm singing?”

“Doesn't that seafood gumbo sound tasty?” She intentionally sounded angelic.

“Sammie ...” he said in a warning tone.

“I think it does.” She grinned as Dan'l's eyes smoldered with mock anger. “What will you have, Uncle? My treat.”

“Ha! Your treat on the Trade Grey account.”

“You're quick,” she said, content.

“The gumbo.” Dan'l smiled, reaching to make her selection from the menu panel then choosing Cajun fried trout himself. “I wonder what failure rate of these food workstations is.”

“I'm sure it happens. What a strange thought.”

“And so the old mind wanders.” Dan'l glanced about the low chamber lined with dinner cubbyholes in poor lighting. “When was the last time you heard from your folks?”

“Last Thursday. Mom called just long enough to say that Lilah Jameson is a grandmother. And that she and Daddy are still undecided about moving up here.” She gave a light laugh. “They've been going back and forth for over three months, but Dad doesn't want to sell the ranch and retire up here.”

“Don't you mean down here?” the old man asked.

“*Up on the moon; down in the caverns,*” she sang softly from a popular tune. Then she lied. “They're both doing just fine. And send their love.”

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“They'd better,” Dan'l said with a wink, then drew deep on his mug of draft beer.

Padding softly in the imported sand, an apprentice server in dark Trade Green brought their meals and informed them that the dessert program was malfunctioning. Then he took away the soup bowls.

There was a brief, but comfortable silence.

“Ever hear from that Thompson kid anymore?”

“Not since he joined the Forestry Service. Dan'l,” she breathed, stirring the gumbo. “You never answered my question from earlier. What is that transparent stuff covering that strange looking holo-studio?”

“Something like coral,” he responded, sampling his meal.

“Seriously?” she coaxed, not liking to be played with when she wasn't playing. “I've got a job to do here.”

“Absolutely serious.” He frowned as he considered a moment, and she could watch his decisions resolve in his eyes. “What I said is true, Sweetie. But, you'll have to leave it at that.”

“Okay. Can I ask if you're still seeing Cinda?”

“No.” This was spoken between mouthfuls. Dan'l was frowning.

“Ahh, care to specify?” she asked, knowing she shouldn't.

“No.” His face soured even more. “I don't see her anymore.”

“Yes, well then,” she sighed, wishing female companionship for him in a society where fems were rare. “So it's on to new conquests for you, then?”

“This work for Dreagan keeps me busy,” he said with commitment and sincerity.

“I wanted to talk to you about that—” She began.

“Figured that when you called,” Dan'l grumbled. “Ask. Go ahead.”

“How'd you get this position?” she asked, feeling too much like one of those accursed, nosy media people.

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“The Founder looked me up,” Dan'l answered, breaking the filet up with the side of his fork. “I suspect that Ben Soqui may have recommended me, but I'm not certain.”

“You don't remember...” she sighed, frowning at the memory of that dirty old man. “What's Dreagan got you doing?”

“Three years ago, almost,” he offered, then regarded her a moment and sighed. “We started working on a land cycle—a *Luna scoota* we called it—and some interesting electro-stabilization theories. Then, we branched out into holography, astrophysics, and photography.”

“Put them all together, and they spell...?” she prompted.

“The *DreaganStar* Project. You've seen the holo-shows?”

“Some. Interesting,” she admitted. “But my work doesn't leave me much time to sit and just stare into a holotank.”

“Your clinic, you mean.” Her old friend sneered. “Sweetie, you spend too much time there and not enough socializing. You need to find a good contract mate.”

“I prefer my practice.”

“My ass, young lady!” Dan'l growled loudly, but stopped himself at this breach of Lunar social customs, muttered an apology, and she had to smile. “You've heard this before?”

“From you, and Mom, and Daddy, and Professor Norton, not to mention any names.”

“Solo. No contract mates in your future?”

“I'm not so sure I like that little custom,” she admitted, knowing some time later that statement would get back to her superior, the *HazeGrey*, head of the Psychology Trade.

Uncle Dan'l seemed startled. She hadn't really denounced the decades-old tradition, she told herself. Sam tasted the dark bread that accompanied the delicious meal while waiting for him to continue the conversation.

“You never did tell me why you left the university,” he began, raising his eyebrows playfully. “Something about three men and a sex scandal?”

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“No. Something about a promotion,” she answered, feeling miffed that he insisted on misunderstanding her assignment here. “I told you all that.”

“I still don't swallow it. How'd you get to be a Master Grey?”

“Dan'l...” But she stopped herself and took up a monstrous portion of the gumbo, knowing he was teasing her.

“When's the last time you had a night on the town?” he asked softly after a moment, then tapped his fork against his drinking glass for emphasis.

Smirking in his direction, she casually savored her mouth full. Her friend fumed across the small table at her deliberate delay. *When HAD she last been out?* she asked herself.

“We're understaffed at the clinic.”

“Answer the question, youngster.” Dan'l's wrinkled face displayed a combination of love and concern.

“The last time we had dinner,” was her meek reply, as she tried to avoid his grim stare and parental attitude.

“Makes that about three months ago,” Dan'l chuckled and shook his head slowly. “They kept you out on that ranch too long.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You've developed antisocial tendencies,” he said, and she didn't care for either his accusation or his tone.

“Can you justify your statement, Uncle?”

“I don't think I need to.”

“Dan'l, I've found most men who have courted me to be presumptuous, uninteresting, domineering, and well, a woman can only take so much. Then, she stops dating.”

“You don't get lonely?” he asked with compassion.

“What! With Patric Hensen—a Security Master—as my clerk and personal Journey Grey? He's a hovering hen. Did I mention that I have several journeymen and apprentices under foot? And there are Taylor Roberts' blunders to fix, and an understaffed clinic to fill my 27-hour work day. I have no *alone* time.”

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“Sweetie, you know what I mean,” he said in a gentle tone.

She mentally bit her lip, assuring herself that the old dear thought only of her best interests.

“Dan'l P. Girdner, answer me a question,” she began, feigning wide-eyed innocence. “Why haven't you snuggled in with some nice contract? People your age are usually contracted for life.”

“Some even get married. Well, maybe not anymore...”

“You're waiting for a wife?” She felt amazed.

“Any ideas on how many women my age live in an area of, say, two hundred thousand kilometers?”

“Well, right...” she muttered sarcastically, knowing that she was chasing comet tails, but she attempted a guesstimate. “I don't know. Maybe twenty in all of the colonies.”

“I allowed for a ten-year age variance when I checked with Colonial Personnel,” he confided, a childlike grin wrinkling his face. “There are actually *seven* in this colony.”

“They are probably kept well occupied,” she sighed, knowing she needed information on Dreagan.

“Two are married. Yes, really married! Three are in long-term contracts.” Dan'l diverted his eyes to the silk ivy that crept along the upper portion of the booth. “One isn't worth the bother to save her life.”

Shuddering in animated gestures, he twisted his face into an expression that a man might have after eating secondhand snot. That brought them both to giggles, and Samantha made a mental note to have dinner with Dan'l more often.



Pleased that it was not yet midnight, Samantha scooped up her personal pad containing her notes on the last few patients as she came through the overfull and cramped living room of her cubby. She headed directly for her prized wooden desk and computer in

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the tiny back room, considering herself fortunate to live in so much space. Being director of a clinic, knowing Dan'l who knew Speaker Groves, the old sour puss of the Board, along with her professional accomplishments, had secured a two-bedroom cubby for her. The second bedroom had become a work space and held a collection of general clutter.

Her home rested on the northern face of McKinley Terrace, up above the basin of a long cavern, but it came without any view of the massive underground cavern. Samantha didn't miss a view of anything down there. Most of the interior of her cubby had needed upgrading when she moved, but she couldn't complain about her home. Having seen the more modern modules, she'd declined billeting in one. They didn't feel that safe or roomy the way this older one did. To Samantha, the newer cubbies were too deep, too far under the moon's surface for her liking. They were nothing like her life on the ranch in Montana, but what could duplicate that childhood home? Here, the front room window displayed other cliff dwellings, systematically painted in pastel colors designed to give a calming effect. Everywhere, Proteus's artificial environment reminded her of the lower decks of an old-fashioned ocean liner.

Her rural upbringing left her over-sensitive to the barren and encapsulated ways of underground living. The Gray Trade Master supported her theory that such conditions were detrimental. Sam found that she sought the surface any chance she got. Hart's restaurant still did a good business up there. It had been moved, and now was in Proteus's busy spaceport where shipping catapults were located along with a few small individual enterprises. Of course, the famous three-kilometer baseball field was still near the southern end of the city, only fifteen kilometers from the *DreaganStar* Project.

## CHAPTER 2 - FIRSTFLIGHT

Two days passed.

By the time Samantha got away from her clinic for the day, the evening traffic had thinned, for which she was grateful. She just wanted to get home, cleaned up, and feel human again. She considered calling Uncle Dan'l to suggest a drunken evening as she crossed her cubby's threshold. His cryptic and brief message waited on her comm: *Be at Dreagan's holo-studio before 2000 hours*. Dan'l's tone seemed unusually insistent. Intrigued, she dropped her small case of homework on the green sofa in the front room, and then she left her cubby, having little time to make that meeting. Not even taking time to clean up, she grabbed a meat roll from a vendor as she waited for the cross-city transit.

Dan'l had been specific about the holo-studio and the time, which was long after his usual working hours. When they had last talked, he said he wouldn't help her research Jonathan Dreagan. She hurried through the tunnels that led to The *DreaganStar* Project's back entrance. There she met Dan'l who carried a pair of gray coveralls and an official project security badge bearing the holo from her old ID badge. Samantha had given him the expired identification tag as a joke months earlier. Pinning the forged identification to her tunic, she thanked her friend and coconspirator. Wondering what had caused his change of heart, she sprang into step with the big Trade Master as they walked across the domed compound.

"You know how much I appreciate this, don't you?" she asked, moon-bouncing to keep up with his long-legged pace.

"Do me a favor, Sweetie." Dan'l frowned, glancing about. "Don't mention it. If you get caught, you're on your own. You understand, darlin'?"

"Understood," she said, concerned by the overly secretive look on his wrinkled face. "Why so late in the day?"

"Can't tell you," he said, eyes darting around the bay constantly. "But you've got very little time before they seal her up."

"Seal who up?" she asked, wondering when he had joined the conspiracy theorists.

"The, er, holographic stage," was his response, and it wasn't like her uncle to stammer. Minor alarms nudged her mind as he continued. "Look, Sammie, you want to know who Jon Dreagan really is, right?"

"I need to know the truth," she said strongly.

"You have to believe that I'm helping you both the best I can. Trust me, baby girl. Just get inside that monstrosity before they lock you out." He pointed up at the crystalline holostage. "And then just play it by ear. Before you come out, most of your questions will be answered, and you'll have a whole new set to fiddle with."

Before Samantha could respond, Dan'l patted her bottom affectionately, winked, and turned to leave. She hurried in the opposite direction, wondering what she would be confronted with.

Thankful that she had done her research, Sam made her way quickly across the docking complex. On impulse, she glanced down at the ID badge Dan'l had gotten for her, and read her supposed job title, expecting to have to pretend to be a tech. To her astonishment the card stated her correct name and occupation as Master psychologist. She seriously doubted her uncle's sanity or at least his sincerity to her research, but recognized that it was what she had to work with. She knew she'd have trouble passing for any kind of technician, not even an apprentice Green.

Samantha spotted a 'fresher station off to her right and quickly entered it to change into Dan'l's gift of oversized gray overalls, her Trade Color. *How did Dan'l manage this?* she wondered, as she closed the fasteners over her other clothes and clipped the name tag to a breast pocket. Then, she moon-bounced quickly from the small booth, glancing at Earth's shimmering blue form on the horizon. As she neared the Operations Tower next to the crystalline sound stage, she thought, *Why so late in the work day? And why so easy?* She began to feel the *set up* and thought of a dozen ways to get even with sweet old Uncle Dan'l.

Two tired looking men dressed in mechanics Trade Red walked passed Samantha about 10 meters from the sound stage, and she wondered if she should schedule interviews with everyone involved with the project. Neither man spoke to her or tried to stop her. *Just how much had Dan'l arranged?* she wondered, rounding one of the legs of the crystal tripod base that shimmered in the combination of natural and artificial light. Samantha had to force herself to continue walking, when she really wanted to stop and examine the huge, pearlescent star point. Finding a side entrance to the Operations building, she made her way up the flights of utility stairs to the fourth level. A big blond man dressed in Master Mechanics' Trade Red coveralls passed her on the steps with a slight nod of his head. She recognized Cal Washington and silently watched the man move stiffly down the stairs without a word. Sam continued upward.

Again she became suspicious as she realized that people accepted her unauthorized presence on the production stage. Was Dan'l's word the law? He'd been very reluctant to speak of his position, but he had worked in high security areas before. She regretted not pressing him during their recent dinner.

With a mental shrug, she stepped pushed open a polysteel door and stepped out onto the roof. Standing on the roof of the building, Samantha found herself facing the spectacular structure called the *DreaganStar Project*.

Up close, the exterior of the sound stage resembled a gigantic single crystal sculpture with a cathedral-like appearance that created a feeling of awe within Sam. The gangway that stretched from the roof across to the sound stage's entrance was a common, portable metal construction ramp with side rails. As she strolled casually toward the suspended walkway, she glanced around at the lunar landscape and sky beyond the dome. Living underground, like other adjustments, caused some lunans to grow to fear the open spaces. Sam had no such sensations and even took time to appreciate the mostly barren, blue-gray vista of far-off mountains for just a moment. Next, she braved the gangplank to creep in the multifaceted structure open but fake air lock.

Samantha had been on holograph stages before, but had found only a few photos of this one on file. There had been plenty of pictures of the production area itself, but only three showed the areas behind the scenes. Stepping off the metal plank, she entered what looked like a functional pressure lock about two meters deep. The inner door stood open wide, and she stopped to listen. She counted to thirty slowly, listening for any sound. Except for the hum of electrics, she heard nothing. Gathering a false courage, she checked for security beams and found none. Samantha stepped over the second lock and into Dreagan's private fantasy.

The white, gray, and blue room was oblong, and she stood at one end, staring for a while at the staging area that encompassed more than half of the opposite end. Some fifteen feet away on the far wall was a huge video screen. The compartment, so familiar from her research, seemed to echo Dreagan's fascinating episodes. Standing there, she took a moment to digest the possibility that she, too, had become one of Dreagan's fans. She took a deep breath and focused her mind. Then she carefully looked around the chamber. This stage was not at all what she had expected, not the usual video production studio. The place smelled of something like sweet spices, but she couldn't identify what exactly which ones.

Halfway across the spacious room stood a semicircular computer console with three inlaid monitors. A person using it would have their back to the door, she thought, glancing across the chamber at the huge view screen that covered the upper half of that wall. Lights and cameras had been suspended from the ceiling. That much she had expected. But the rest of the fictional vessel was furnished as one might expect of a space-going vehicle and very detailed in its decor. From where she stood near the door, to her left and hollowed out of one of the Star's appendages, was a spacious sleeping area decorated in blue hues and silver accents. Against the opposite wall were a compact kitchen and bright yellow dinette. Nearer to her on the same side stood a small work alcove that seemed to double as a desk. The whole area was tidy. Anything that might move, like a coffee cup or a hydro spanner had been secured or fastened down.

Glancing at the main console, Sam saw three yellow lights flickering and what looked like a star map on one of the monitors. The computer looked completely functional.

Voices floated up on the still air and through the airlock and startled Sam back to the fact that she might be trespassing. Three males approached. She could hear their footsteps on the Operation's tower roof. The instinct to flee took over. Samantha quickly bounced to the sleeping area, feeling like a stowaway, as boots sounded on the gangplank outside. She heard the sound of muffled laughter from the men as she slid around the high sleeping mats and ducked between them and the polysteel wall. Rolling on her side, she slid down on her right side, out of sight, and felt a tug on her left foot. In the next instant the men came into the main room, and she could only recognize Dreagan's voice of the three.

"...unless that stabilizer acts up again," a deep rich baritone was saying. "Jon, are you sure this is right?"

"I've made up my mind, Cal," she heard Jonathan Dreagan reply. "It's my responsibility. The only way to solve that vibration problem is to test it under actual conditions. What else can we do? Build a derrick to rock the ship until you're satisfied? This will work, Cal. Believe me."

“And if it doesn't?” the deep voice asked grimly.

“Maybe I'll sell the whole goddamned mess and retire to some lovely desert isle planetside.” Dreagan's voice sounded tired and bitter compared to the videos Samantha had studied. “Let's get on with it. What'd you want to check, Higgins?”

“Food supplies,” a nasally voice said. “I'll just be a moment.”

One set of feet shuffled toward the kitchenette, and Sam could hear one of the others release a long sigh. She tried to soundlessly free her tangled left ankle from the cords that anchored the sleeping pads to the wall—just as if it was a spaceship.

“Jon, I wish you'd reconsider,” the baritone said sternly. “It's not just your life you're risking.”

“No life is being risked.” He laughed in reply, and Sam heard the sound of cabinets closing. “Look, do your goddamned job, and I'll do mine.” Dreagan let out a sigh of resignation. “Cal, I appreciate your concern. Dan'l and I went over those simulations on three separate occasions.”

“And I heard that's not all you and that crazy old man went over. I don't like it. I don't, Jon. You can't change that. But I won't push this because I wouldn't want anyone else working on Star's engine. So, I'll play it your way. Come on, Higgins. Have a good flight, Jon.”

Samantha listened to the footsteps signaling that Cal and Higgins had departed, while she turned the conversation over in her mind. *Stabilizers?* Probably for the cameras, she concluded. But, *Have a good flight?* She decided that Cal Washington must have been humoring Dreagan for some reason. Maybe the Founder had indeed gone mad, and his technicians merely played along in the game. Then, she heard the air lock *hiss* closed, and a lump formed in her throat. Footsteps crossed the big chamber. Sam held her breath.

“Star,” Dreagan called. “Preflight check: Begin.”

Various sounds of electronic activity sounded about the main room, and a second airlock sealed shut with a hiss. The floor began to vibrate slightly, and with that came an undercurrent of something like a powerful engine's rumble. Perspiration trickled down Samantha's back. Mental alarms clamored inside her, and she quickly rethought her situation.

“Preflight completed,” the computer reported in a deep masculine tone.

“Three-minute delay count to liftoff,” was Dreagan's next order, his voice sounding a little closer. “Better give me minute reminders.”

*Liftoff?* She laughed soundlessly, tangled in the bed's tie-down cords. What does he mean *liftoff?* She let out air slowly to calm the pounding in her chest. Silently, Samantha wondered how to unwrap the elasticized cords around her ankle without being seen.

“Where's my passenger, Star?” Dreagan asked, and she knew for sure that dear uncle Dan'l had set her up.

“There is someone reclined between your sleeping pad and the bulkhead,” said the mechanical voice. “An unconventional position, but secure. Her foot seems to be trapped.”

“My sleeping pad?” Dreagan laughed heartily. “Good evening, Doctor Alexander. I suggest you use the goddamned jump seat for liftoff. We'll be weightless in a short while, and I'll feel better if you're safely strapped in.”

“*Shades of Grey*,” she muttered with thoughts of strangling Dan'l as she tried to pull herself up gracefully to sit on the blue bed sheet with its silvery threads.

The anchoring cord tightened, allowing her to go no farther.

“Need a hand?” she heard Jon Dreagan ask, and she glanced over her shoulder to see him standing at the crescent-shaped computer console.

His face was expressionless.

“No,” she muttered as she reached to free her trapped foot, unwinding the cord, and then throwing it to the gray polysteel floor.

Climbing to her feet, she felt blood flow into her cheeks. Samantha looked across the chamber to find the dark-haired Jonathan Dreagan smiling at his console. He activated the forward viewing screen with a wave of his hand over the console. Then he gestured her toward the two overstuffed jump seats between the console and the forward screen, which now displayed the old port's domed bay and part of the Ops tower.

“I assume Dan'l told you of my visit,” she chuckled at herself, feeling foolish as she casually crossed the chamber, head high and hoping to look dignified.

“I arranged it,” he said with a disarmingly boyish grin. “Dan'l didn't think a 3-hour tour of part of the solar system would inconvenience you, since I *am* your job right now. I hope you won't have any objections.”

“An excursion?” she asked, as she suppressed the flush that reddened her face. “What kind of excursion?”

“Jon,” the computer interrupted. “Two minutes.”

“My DreaganStar is a functional space craft,” Dreagan explained, pushing back a black lock of hair. “She's experimental, of course. We're retesting some stabilization equipment—Cal Washington's design. Care to come for the test flight?”

“You're telling me this oversized Christmas ornament flies?” She hesitated, stopping near the seats below the console, deciding as she watched his expression.

Shrugging, Dreagan bounced around the computer console during her silence and stood near one of the blue, soft-sculptured chairs. They actually had gray safety harnesses installed on them, Samantha saw, impressed by his attention to the stage's detail.

“Believe it's a holo studio, if you wish, but in a minute the flight sequence locks the computer. You will be my shipmate for three hours of space flight, and you can't walk away.”

The Founder settled into his seat.

Sam regarded the “boy genius,” now in his early forties, as he began buckling himself into the jump seat farthest from her. Samantha noted that he held himself well and reminded herself that his psych profile showed outstanding social adjustment. Those little eccentric behaviors known to be found in mental giants had been rumors.

“I need your decision,” he said, grave-faced and grim. “Computer, audio count, please.”

Dreagan stared directly at her, holding her eyes, and Samantha wanted to know what he was thinking. The computer began counting backward from forty-eight. The Founder relaxed in his

chair. His deep-set, intelligent eyes watched her, and they held an uncomfortable intensity. He waited, smug.

Sam realized that the second jump seat was a recent installation, and she remembered that of the two photos she'd seen of this specific area, both showed only one such chair. The off-centered position of the second jump seat in relation to his chair told Samantha that it was not only a more recent addition—it was an afterthought. She could see subtle design differences between the two chairs.

“I installed it this morning,” he said evenly. “For you.”

Glancing back to Jonathan Dreagan, she saw his confident smile. He waved a hand in the chair's direction. With a grin, she bounced over and flopped easily into the second chair, pulling the harness about her as the computer announced nineteen.

“Begin flight sequence,” Dreagan ordered, grinning like a happy child.

Then he reached over to tug once on her harness. Samantha settled into the deep padding holding her breath with anticipation. Satisfied, he tapped one of the seven buttons on the arm of his chair, and she gazed forward to the forward screen. On the wide viewer cryptic information overlaid the scene of the operations area below. She conceded that maybe the Founder's flight of fantasy would be a pleasant diversion.

“There will be a mild G force for a lunar liftoff,” he informed her with a glance sideways. “You're comfortable in free fall, aren't you, AshenGrey?”

“I've trained for it,” she muttered, trying to keep the scorn from her tone.

“Once we're free of Luna, the ship will begin to tumble to simulate gravity. I prefer lunar gravity, but I can adjust it if you'd like.”

“To Earth's? No thank you!” she sputtered in mock horror, then smiled. “Lunar G is fine, Dr. Dreagan.”

“I thought as much,” came his reply. “Star, is the dome cleared?”

“The dome is open.”

“Lift off when ready, Star.”

The holostage rumbled beneath Samantha's feet.

With that sound came a high-pitched electrical whine that was just short of deafening. Sam shook her head to clear its ringing. The whine persisted. When she covered her ears with her hands, Dr. Dreagan glanced at her. He shrugged sheepishly, and then resumed watching the screen. She followed his gaze and watched Proteus shrink away.

Now, the gray surface of the moon fell away, and Samantha almost felt like she was flying. Dreagan had managed to simulate even the G forces that pushed against her body and a swaying sensation that the viewer angle mimicked. All that made her wonder how long she would have to go along with this game.

*Come on, Alexander,* she thought sarcastically to herself. *This crystal Christmas tree ornament doesn't fly. It can't.*

But it was a damn fine simulation!

Relaxing in her seat, she reminded herself of her assignment and felt relieved that the interview had come so easily. Soon, the sound effects quieted down, and Dreagan pushed out of his harness effortlessly into zero gravity.

“Computer. Structural report,” he called, moving toward the airlock.

Sam wondered what he was up to.

“No indications of damage, Jon,” the male computer voice replied.

Sam unbuckled her harness and swung over the computer console. The zero gravity seemed remarkably realistic, she thought, bouncing carefully to the floor and grabbing at the side of the console to stop her motion. Dreagan, who was opening a wall locker near the air lock, caught the movement in his peripheral vision and looked up, startled. He grinned, then pulled a white pressure suit from the closet. Samantha gently pushed to move closer.

“Not that I don't trust Dan'l's circuits, but I think I'll have a look.” His eyes danced with amusement, as he donned the white p-suit. “I believe I told you a lie when I said you couldn't walk away. Care to take a walk?”

“In a p-suit, Doctor Dreagan?” she asked, floating to a stop by bumping her left palm gently against the airlock door. “Well, I'll admit your antigrav field is remarkably advanced. But a p-suit?”

“*Antigrav field?*” Dreagan laughed as he sealed his rare Trade White suit. “Trust me, AshenGrey Alexander; you will require the pressure suit. I am responsible for your safety while you are onboard my ship.”

Fishing inside the opened locker, Dreagan produced a second life-supporting suit in Trade Grey and floated it over to her. She'd decided to play it by ear as Dan'l had suggested, and quickly donned the Founder's second p-suit while reminding herself that this was Dreagan's game. She had to learn his rules first, and then she'd modify them to fit hers.

Once she had sealed the front of her small suit, she looked up to find his dark head encased in a delicate polybubble. He passed a second bubblehead to her and turned to the locker once more. While she sealed the helmet, he brought out a small electronic wristband and strapped it on. Next, he caught her arm, plugged a second device into her suit, and then wrapped it around her left wrist. She could hear his breathing within her bubble.

“I thought you'd prefer to communicate with more than just hand gestures,” he whispered, checking the various seals on her p-suit with impersonal professionalism. “Volume check.”

“Sounds good, Doctor. No need to whisper.”

He took her arm and tweaked one of the micropods, then adjusted his own. She found herself amazed at his thoroughness in all of this, realizing that he truly believed his delusion of space flight. Maybe the Biggies of the Board knew more than they'd indicated, she thought, working to stay stationary in zero gravity.

“Volume check, Star,” Dreagan said while closing the locker.

“Where are we going, dressed like this?” she asked, sharper than necessary.

“Comm link, affirmative,” the computer responded in her ears. “Still no indications of stabilizer malfunctions.”

“Good.” He seemed satisfied. “Prepare to open the airlock.”

Only the inside oval hatch dilated open, and the Founder casually waved Samantha ahead. She pushed carefully against a camera mount and swam into the cube. Dreagan came through, then ordered the hatch pressure-sealed. The computer complied with a hiss sounding amazingly like a real air lock.

Hands touched Samantha's shoulder and spun her around, startling her. Without a word Dreagan attached a guideline tether to a ring on the waist of her suit. Securing it to a pad eye in the wall, he attached a second rope to himself, then clamped it in the airlock. Sam found herself trembling.

“Wouldn't want my first-mate drifting away,” he chuckled, with a final check on the seal of her helmet. “Star, open outside airlock.”

Dreagan's hand held tightly to her guideline as the two shielded doors slid sideways, and she gazed into the vacuum of space where Proteus should have been.

The arch of the Milky Way galaxy stretched brightly glistening across the flat black expanse of space. She'd only seen this from the portholes of the many Earth/Lunar shuttles she'd ridden in the last few years. She hadn't expected to step out into the complete nothingness that danced before her.

Feeling nauseous, Samantha stepped backwards and slightly behind Dreagan while closing her eyes instinctively to center herself. *Walking in space!* she thought with delight at the reality of a childhood dream. Opening her eyes, she felt some disorientation and steeled herself against it. She swallowed once.

A hand on her arm steadied her, and she found dark eyes watching her with concern. She whispered that she would be all right in a moment and drew in a deep breath, exhaled and then drew in another.

“Are you certain you're okay?” Jon Dreagan asked over the comm.

“This is like a dream, a childhood fantasy come true. Just give me a minute.”

Looking around with newfound wonder, she couldn't distinguish Earth's moon in the distance. Dr. Dreagan wordlessly pointed in its direction. A dark gray speck, Luna shimmered in a pale halo of light, superimposed on the blue Earth.

“Feel free to wander, AshenGrey,” Dreagan said. “Just stay on your leash, please. I'll be looking over Cal's goddamned problem child.”

“I think I'll stay here, thank you,” she muttered, concentrating to calm her heart and breathing while wishing the Founder would watch his language.

With a shrug he turned away and climbed out along one of Star's hundred bright appendages. She gathered the strong maintenance tether tightly in her hands. The reality of the situation flooded into her mind, and she found herself holding her breath. Shaking off the impact, she became delighted with the sparkling universe all around her.

Jonathan Dreagan would take time to thoroughly examine that stabilizer, she realized, allowing her to enjoy the view. She struggled to do so.

Aside from the shuttles from Luna to Earth, outer space seemed an exciting new experience to Samantha. She'd read volumes on the cosmos, but never had the experience of becoming so intimately acquainted with it. And here it was, waiting to be lived and believed! Her initial shock had passed. She reviewed her basics in *Zero Gravity Maneuvers* and began experimenting with her twenty-meter tether. Sighting her host almost thirty meters out on what seemed to be one of the largest star points, she felt more at ease and took the time to examine what she could of his amazing vessel.

Star's outer hull seemed constructed of a sturdy fabric she'd never seen before. Yes, *fabric!* The silvery, almost transparent stuff stretched across and around the girders of the vessel. At times, she could almost make out the shapes of the electrical and mechanical equipment within the vessel's skin. Had the Founder invented a new substance, she wondered, or had he simply discovered something yet unknown to the scientific community? The ship appeared sometimes white, sometimes blue, and sometimes silver against the black velvet backdrop. Easing into a relaxed state of mind, she made her way carefully across the many and varied lengths of star points on the surface of the craft. She wandered about the configuration of spokes, but she could not see any obvious pattern or sequences.

Jon Dreagan never spoke. She could hear the reassuring rhythm of his breathing, and she felt grateful for time to reevaluate her situation. Satisfying her limited scientific curiosity of the starship, she relaxed and allowed her body to drift on the tether. How this thing could lift off of Luna, let alone actually fly, was beyond her! That loud, weird-sounding engine had to be based in a whole new theory, she decided, and remembered that Dreagan had referred to Dan'l's circuits. She felt proud of her old friend and very happy that he'd let her in on this little secret. Deep in thought, Sam heard Dreagan's soft voice in her earpiece.

"AshenGrey, how are you doing?"

"Just fine, Dreagan. I'm enjoying this wonderful dream." She chuckled, as he scooted easily across a larger crystal beam near her. "How's Cal's problem?"

"Looks good. I guess the third time *is* a charm." He stopped, having reached the airlock. "Time to go back in."

"If you insist. It's beautiful. And so wide open." She gathered up her tether, and Dreagan reached to yank on her rope. "No, Dreagan, don't. Let's see if I can do this alone."

"Dreagan, is it?" he asked with an odd little chuckle.

"It fits. My friends call me Sammie."

"So does Dan'l," he said, as she approached the lock with care. "Would you mind if I called you Samantha?"

"If you wish." She sighed, not enamored with her given name. "What happens now?"

Dreagan gave her an odd side-glance as he caught her in his arms and swung her into the airlock. He took a moment to peer into her bubblehead before letting her go. After telling the computer to seal the outer doors, he released his tether. As space began to disappear behind polysteel doors, Sam successfully loosed her rope. Then, she glanced back for a last look before the polysteel hatch blocked the view.

“You don't scare easily,” he remarked as the interior hatch dilated open into the starship. “Unusual in a female.”

“I enjoy a good adventure now and then,” she said, reaching to her helmet's releases.

“Don't those distinguished members of the Board of Directors intimidate you?” he asked, pulling off his.

“You scare me more,” she admitted, yanking off the bubblehead. “You didn't answer my question, Dreagan.”

“What happens now? Dan'l said you drink lemon twists.” The man stripped off the pressure suit expertly, revealing his white coveralls and then hung his p-suit in the locker. “Would you care for one? Now, you get your interview.”

He moved quickly toward the kitchenette, while Sam sought to focus her mind.

After stowing her p-suit, she took another look at the ship's interior, but with a completely different perspective. Everything was as before her walk in the void, but now it made sense. Of course equipment and fixtures had to be secured before the flight, she reminded herself. Was this more than just another shuttle design?

The Founder called her to join him at the yellow dinette set. When she'd hopped over to him, Dreagan passed a plastic tumbler into her hand. Accepting the drink, she took the stool across the polysteel table from Jon Dreagan and looked at him with new but concealed interest, completely intrigued.

“What do you think of The DreaganStar now?” he asked with pride. “Not quite the ornament on top of the Christmas tree you first thought of it. Is it?”

“This answers a multitude of questions,” she admitted after a sample of the lemon drink.

“Such as?” He sputtered a laugh over his coffee.

“Such as what the Founder of the Five Lunar Colonies has been up to these days,” she said happily. “I couldn't picture a man of your reputation settling down to being just a holo-actor.”

“My reputation?” he asked with caution and a slight raise of his black eyebrows. His smile quickly returned.

“As an adventurer, inventor, and pioneer,” she said.

“You know Groves wants to nail me?” He growled suddenly. “I won't let him in on this project. It's driving him nuts.”

“I take it the Corporation doesn't own this experiment?” She studied his face.

“Bright girl!” Dreagan grinned, visibly pleased. “The DreaganStar Project is privately funded by Dan'l, Cal, and me.”

“Do you realize my assignment, as decreed by your Board of Directors?” she asked, trying to stay casual.

“They want me committed.” Dreagan leaned across the small table towards her, eyes drawn tight in speculation. “But do you know why, Doctor?”

“I have been wondering,” she admitted as she leaned in toward him. “The corporation would love to get the royalties from a new space drive, no doubt.”

“Undoubtedly, but there’s more.” Dreagan sighed deeply and pushed back a dark lock of hair. “Amil and I go back too many days. He’s a camp follower who used to be content just riding on my coattails. Now, greed is getting the better of the boy. Groves wants my position.”

“As Chairman?” she asked, keenly aware of his closeness, his natural smells, and intense scrutiny.

“And more,” he said in a clandestine whisper.

She laughed, easing away from him and then drank some of the lemon twist.

“Careful, Dreagan. That’s paranoid.”

“On whose part? Mine or his?” he asked, not offended.

“You’re my client, Dreagan. Tell me, why arrange for me to come with you?”

“Even up until that airlock opened, you believed what I want everyone to believe—Star is simply a studio.” His smile was gentle, but then he looked sternly at Sam. “I prefer that it stays that way.”

“Right now, I have no problem with that, Dreagan. I want gigabytes more data.” And then it occurred to her that they weren’t floating all around the ship. “How did you arrange for this artificial gravity?”

“I set Star to tumble while you were getting out of your p-suit.” Dreagan hesitated slightly then continued. “I’ve discovered that someone broke into my personal file. Later the same day the Board members interviewed you. I’d like to discuss, er... Did you say you are more afraid of me than them?”

“Irrelevant. You’re right about their motives—especially Groves. Since you know why I am here, let me ask, why allow me? Surely, I must pose some threat?”

“I like adventure,” he said with a rakish grin. “After Dan’l told me your background and probable temperament toward them.” Now, his eyes squinted in disdain. “I decided to risk it. Besides, maybe I wonder about my precious sanity, whatever it is. You, Samantha Alexander, have just become another pawn in Grove’s sly game.”

“Pawns sometimes checkmate, Dreagan,” was her reply as she set her drink down for emphasis. “And don’t be so sure I’m just a pawn. How do you feel about my observing you?”

“I’ll cooperate, providing you stay out from underfoot when I’m in the ‘fresher,” he said with a grin that quickly transformed into a sneer. “Despite all our security precautions and late night tests, Groves now knows about The DreaganStar Project. I have no idea how long he’ll keep quiet. You’re not to discuss it with anyone.”

“You’re my client: I am legally bound to your privacy. Groves may not have allowed for that.”

“Maybe, maybe not. He rarely misses a trick, that son of a...” He stopped and drank his coffee to drown his growl. “How much of my time will you require for your analysis?”

“I’ll observe you in and out of your usual routine. It’s best that way. A competency decision is not an easy judgment, Dreagan,” she said, wondering about the mood swing he had just displayed. “I work best without time tables and restrictions, so if I get in your way, it’s okay to tell me, and I’ll move.”

“Sounds workable. Would you like to take a fast flight out as far as Saturn? I'll have you home safe before 23:00. I have to work in the morning.”

“Saturn? You're serious?” She laughed away internal stress, not really knowing if he was serious or not. She toyed with her tumbler, curious to see what he'd do with the silence.

“We've built an all new type of power plant into the Star. Saturn and back, with time for sightseeing, in under two hours. And that is at less than quarter speed. You wanted to talk?”

“You're the pilot.” She laughed to lessen her tension. “And yes, I think I'd really like to see Saturn.”

“As you wish. Star, load flight program; Saturnalia, then comm the base.” Dreagan took a long breath. “Washington?”

“Glad to hear you.” The speaker in the computer console imitated Cal Washington's deep voice. “Any problems, Boss?”

“None, my friend. I went out and had a good look around, and so did the goddamned Psyche.” Dreagan winked and motioned her to keep quiet. “Stand-down for about ninety minutes, will you? I'm taking her out for a spin.”

“Show off! Okay. We'll break for a while and be back listening in one hour.” Washington's deep voice sounded as Samantha finished her lemon twist. “You're paying overtime.”

“Which means nothing,” Dreagan laughed easily. “See you later. Computer, close comm. Implement Saturnalia.”

Around them engines began to hum loudly, but not quite like in the takeoff sequence. Dreagan appeared to listen for a moment, then rose and went to the computer console in the main chamber. When he waved his hand above one of the sections, the humming ceased, and he returned to the small kitchen table where Sam waited, thinking.

“The jump seats are more comfortable,” he said amiably, taking up their empty glasses. “And the view's much better.”

“You installed that second seat for me?” she asked, standing and stretching muscles left tense after a bad day.

“Couldn't have you bouncing around up here,” he replied and began to replenish her drink from a miniature refrigerator.

“Sounds like you and Dan'l ganged up on me,” she chuckled, wondering why he'd just emphasized her bouncing.

“The Board is ganging up on me. Groves thinks like that. Consider it self-defense on my part, Psyche.”

“He can't force me to rule against you,” she said as he passed her glass back to her. “That has to be based on my judgment.”

“Don't be so damn naive,” Dreagan growled, as he headed to the jump seats below the computer console while on the viewer, a spectacle of stars rotated. “Look, I realize the power your profession has gained in the last hundred years, but you'd better realize Groves plays for keeps.”

“That's the only way I play, Dreagan,” she responded heartily, settling in her seat and feeling flattered that it had been put there for her. “I still don't see why you're so agreeable to my presence.”

“I can ... tolerate you underfoot because, ah ... of Dan'll's recommendations,” he began, and she knew he'd wanted to say something else. “Your uncle is a shrewd man. Sometimes he's a better adviser to me than most of my goddamned administration staff. Loads of common sense.”

“Not so common, is it?” she muttered trying to read his real intentions from his eyes and casual posture.

“But even more, Psyche, I realize the power of your profession. So does Amil, I'm afraid.” Dreagan sat in his chair and frowned, looking out at the star field. “I hope you have some political savvy, or you'll be ripped apart by my unscrupulous Board of Directors.”

“Is that a holograph out there?” she asked, trying to lighten the subject as well as change it.

“That's the real thing, right now, although I can throw holos or photos up there as well.” Dreagan shuddered almost imperceptibly, and then sighed. “Tell you what, Psychologist, I'll pay you, say, 11,000 Lunar credits and passage to wherever you want, if you'll drop this case against me.”

“Resign?” She kept from laughing.

“No guarantee of next possible position or occupation.” He turned to her and added, “Is a gratuity unprofessional?”

“Barely legal, sir,” she said hotly, then cooled her act down a notch. “And it can be very offensive.”

“So, you are emotional! Good. That's not professional, though, is it?” Dreagan asked snidely, then leaned hungrily in her direction as his eyes swept the length of her body. “And if I decide to seduce you?”

Samantha pretended to shiver under his lusty gaze, sensing the adrenaline increase in her bloodstream. With regret she knew how good his idea sounded. She mentally ducked behind her professional shroud.

“No human has truly been seduced in the last hundred years, at least, Dreagan. But sex is great for tension release, as you know.” She watched his thoughtful amusement at that, then dared to add, “And what if I decide to seduce you? You are a very attractive man. In some ways.” Dreagan shifted in his seat, smiling, and she knew she had to get that out of his mind fast. She hurried to add, “No, I don't want your gratuity. I'd be thrown out of my Trade. Besides, you may well prove to be my most fascinating case.”

“So, do you think your Trade wants you to be my psychologist or to play my sex kitten?” The Founder smirked, easing back into his seat, then taking a deep breath.

“I always make my own decisions,” she said in a cool tone, knowing she'd riled him, and feeling glad for it. “Not my Trade. And I don't make trades or sales.”

“I could sweeten the offer,” he suggested, turning in his seat to face her. “You're a Trade Master. I could supply you with private grants, fund projects.”

“I am content financially, thank you. Your project has delighted my sense of adventure, and you can appreciate that.” She laughed as his face brightened. “No, Dreagan. You can't buy me out. I'd like to even be able to be on board when you test Star at full throttle.” She hesitated as a thought struck. “Wait. Why, if this ship is her and she, does it have such a masculine audio response system?”

“Good question. Shows how you think. Never looked at it that way.” He chuckled, pushing back his black hair. “The computer's vocal is a combination of mine and Dan'l's mostly. We tried to give it a New England accent, but it's not working.” His eyes took a thoughtful glance back at the console, and then he shifted again to watch the stars on the front viewer.

“Why keep the ship a secret?” she asked after a bit.

“Industrial espionage. Structural and communications screw-ups. There have already been a few suspicious setbacks.” He grimaced. “Some personnel injuries, too.”

“Accidents?” she sighed, thinking *here it comes*.

“I don't accept that goddamned theory,” he growled as she glanced at the viewer with its tumbling star field.

The man again grew silent. She watched his body carefully, and saw that he used some kind of relaxation technique. After several deep breaths, he blinked three times, then turned back to her, smiling.

“I'm sorry. It's been a long day.” He released a deep sigh, continuing, “We could have been killed on take-off.”

“But we weren't,” she chuckled then added in a serious tone. “Why are you trying to frighten me, Dreagan?”

“Your teachers should have taught you the goddamned answer to that, kitten,” he muttered, rubbing his dark eyes. “And I thought you understood politics.”

“I don't like politics, Dr. Dreagan. In fact, I disregard politicians most of the time. Low level power fanatics, most of them, and unable to compete at my Trade's level.” She sounded truly bitter. “You think you have power struggles! Imagine, if you can, a hierarchy of professional manipulators at each other's throats. Grey is not my favorite color, Doctor. What I do for a living is my business—only.”

“Dan'l said he'd have to trick you into those coveralls, but we couldn't have you getting stopped by Security before you got up here.” Dreagan chuckled softly. “We altered and dyed a pair of mine.”

“You ganged up on me,” she said, pointing an index finger his way, watching for his reactions.

“In the interest of science, Doctor Alexander,” he said with a tired sigh. “All in the interest of science.”

“Providing it suits your interests,” she muttered, wondering if biology was the science he had in mind. “And investments. That's your reputation too, Dreagan.”

“I need to do more research on you. By the way, what have you been doing since they gave you my dossier? I expected you two days ago?”

“Researching the many public sides of Jonathan Dreagan.”

“My exciting and phenomenal career?” His tone became sarcastic. “Did it make stimulating reading?”

“Might make an interesting documentary someday. Not my line of work, though. What plans do you have for me?”

He grinned wickedly, playfully bouncing his black eyebrows.

“Frankly, this sanity investigation is just short of being humorous to me. I've spent half my life under one kind of scrutiny or another.” He stretched his legs and glanced in her direction.

“Where would you like to start? Childhood? Sexual preference? Or perhaps religious attitudes?”

“I don't work that way, Dreagan. Show me how that main console works?”

“Absolutely not.”